

IMPORTANT PASSOVER TEXTS IN JOSEPHUS AND PHILO

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In order that the passover statements by first century writers may be understood, it is essential that their festal terms be cataloged and interpreted. Generally speaking, these ritual words and phrases are an unknown language, and may be of quite different meaning from their English translations. For example, the Greek word *πάσχα*, or *φάσκα*, as sometimes occurs, is found about twelve times in Josephus. It is translated *passover*, and we commonly think of the paschal supper. But *commonly*, with Josephus, the word is interchangeable with the eight-day feast of unleavened bread, and only three times does it refer directly to the 14th day of Nisan, while only three times does it signify the paschal lamb. And apparently no place has as yet come to light where *πάσχα* designates the supper alone, although it may refer to paschal sacrifice and supper together. In Josephus, there are about twenty-five references to this sacrificial ceremony.

Again, a writer is sometimes speaking of ceremonies throughout (*καθ' ἥν*) the feast of unleavened bread. Again not. But in any event, the analyst must carefully compare any one statement with all the other cognate records before valid conclusions can be drawn. Therefore every *πάσχα* sentence must be seriously examined, for the writer by no means invariably, as some conclude, thereby refers to a sacrificial supper on a specific date. Moreover, with Josephus, it is easy to overlook details. Consequently it seems worth while to analyze a few important passages from these authori-

tative witnesses in the time of Christ—statements which have provoked much discussion. For convenience, the most important texts will be recited.

I. *Wars II.i.1-3 and Ant. XVII. ix.1-3*. The circumstances underlying these two Josephus texts appear to be as follows: The seven days of public mourning for Herod the Great ended at evening, apparently at the evening *ineunte* of 14 Nisan, at which time a sedition arose among the Jews. The time is indicated in Section 3 of the first text:

καὶ δὴ τῆς τῶν ἀζύμων ἐνστάσης ἑορτῆς, ἡ πάσχα παρὰ Ἰουδαίοις καλεῖται, πολὺ τι θυμάτων πλῆθος ἐνδέχομένη, κάτεισι μὲν ἐκ τῆς χώρας λαὸς ἄπειρος ἐπὶ τὴν θρησκείαν, οἱ δὲ τοὺς σοφιστὰς πενθοῦντες ἐν τῷ Ἱερῷ συνειστήκεσσαν τροφὴν τῇ στάσει ποριζόμενοι.¹

Translation (mine)—

And now that the feast of unleavened bread had already come, which is called pascha by the Jews, one that contributes such a large number of sacrifices, countless people, on the one hand, stream in from the country for the ceremony, while, on the other hand, those mourning for the doctors¹ stood in the temple procuring recruits for their faction.

The foregoing sentence outlines the contrasting situation. Josephus adds that the clamors of the temple party were heard all over Jerusalem. At the same time the masses had lodged in the plain and were ready to offer their paschal lambs. Evening had come on, as indicated by the drunken rioting of Archelaus.² *It was his conduct that caused the*

¹ *Wars II.i.3.*

² *Wars II.ii.5.*

sedition. He countered at once by sending his general against the Jews, but they drove him away with stones. Then a tribune with a cohort of soldiers was sent. These were killed. After this the people "betoook themselves to their sacrifices as if they had done no mischief." Finally Archelaus sent his whole army—the footmen into the city, and the horsemen into the plain, who fell upon the people as they were offering their lambs, and killed three thousand.

It is quite obvious that this series of episodes points to one evening only—that of the paschal sacrifice. Antipater identifies the sedition as occurring at this time.³ In addition, he catalogs this sacrifice as a private offering (*iōlaus θυσίας*). Similarly Philo.⁴ We know from the sacrificial date—14 Nisan—that the moon had come to her full, and on this evening rose "full" in the east as the sun set in the west. The people actually made the assault with lambs in one hand and stones in the other, while the wailers in the temple urged them on.⁵ The description is significant in showing (1) that the passover lambs were at this time being slain in the evening, and (2) that they were being offered in the outskirts of the city, "around the sanctuary," not in it.

Such was the temper of the age in which Jesus was born.

II. *Ant. II.xiv.6, III.x.5, and XI.iv.8.*

It seems inconsistent to make Josephus say in one place that the paschal lambs were being slain from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m., with the supper necessarily occurring on the subsequent evening, when in other passages he describes the whole passover

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Philo, Vol. VII, *De Decalogo* XXX.159. Tr. by Colson. London, 1937. Loeb Classical Lib.

⁵ *Ant. XVII.ix.3.*

ceremony—sacrifice, feast, and burning of the remnants—as taking place on one day only, the 14th of Nisan. Here is one of his descriptions of the 14th day:

ἐνστάσης δὲ τῆς τεσσαρεσκαιδεάτης πάντες πρὸς ἄφ-οδον ἔχοντες ἔθνον, καὶ τῷ αἷματι τὰς οἰκιας ἥγνυζον ὑσσώπου κόμαις ἀναλαβόντες καὶ δειπνήσαντες τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν κρεῶν ἔκανσαν ὡς ἔξελευσόμενοι. ὅθεν νῦν ἔτι κατὰ τὸ ἔθος οὕτως θύομεν τὴν ἑορτὴν πάσχα καλοῦντες.
...⁶

Translation (mine)—

But when the fourteenth day had come, all, in readiness to start, sacrificed, and purified the houses with blood, using bunches of hyssop for sprinkling, and after the repast burnt the remnants of the meat as people ready for departure.

In this passage three principal acts are tied to the 14th of Nisan—the *sacrificing*, the *purifying*, and the *burning* of the remnants after the supper. The ceremony is confined to one complete sentence with *kai* connectives. Consequently it is inconsistent that up to the word *ἥγνυζον*, it is 14 Nisan, but that from there on it is 15 Nisan. And please note that Josephus adds, "to this day we keep this sacrifice in the same customary manner." (Cf. English text.)

A text similar to the foregoing is found in Philo, for which the claim has also been made that it represents two dates. I quote Dr. Colson's translation of this passage:

On this day every dwelling-house is invested with the outward semblance and dignity of a temple. The victim is then slaughtered and dressed for the festal meal as befits the occasion. The guests assembled for the banquet have been cleansed by purificatory lustrations, and are there not as in other festive gatherings, to indulge the belly with wine and viands, but to fulfil with prayers and hymns the custom handed

⁶ *Ant. II.xiv.6.* Tr. by Thackeray. Loeb Classical Library.



Last quarter moon at highest point at sunrise

down by their fathers. The day on which this national festivity (*πανδήμου εἰωχίας*) occurs may very properly be noted. It is the 14th of the month, etc.⁷

In this description both sacrifice and supper are featured. The word *εἰωχία* means feast. And in addition, it is the *national* feast about which Philo is discoursing, and he says plainly that it was kept on the 14th of the month. There appears to be no place for any 15th-day supper in this text!

Josephus has altogether three descriptions of a 14th-day passover, the first of which we have cited. A second text is as follows:

Τῷ δὲ μηνὶ τῷ Ξανθικῷ ὃς Νισάν παρ' ἡμῖν καλέεται καὶ τοῦ ἔτους ἐστὶν ἀρχή, τεσσαρεσκαιδεκάτῃ κατὰ σελήνην ἐν κριῶ τοῦ ἥλιον καθεστώτος τούτῳ γάρ τῷ μηνὶ τῆς ὑπ' Αἴγυπτίου δουλείας ἡλευθερώθημεν, καὶ τὴν θυσίαν ἦν τότε ἐξίοντας ἀπ' Αἴγυπτου θύσαι προεῖπον ἡμᾶς πάσχα λεγομένην, δι' ἔτους ἐκάστου θύειν ἐνόμισεν, καὶ δὴ τελοῦμεν αὐτὴν κατὰ φατρίας μηδενὸς τεθυμένων εἰς τὴν ἐπιοῦσαν τηρουμένουν.⁸

Translation (mine)—

And we were commanded to offer every year the sacrifice called *πάσχα*, which I previously said we offered upon leaving Egypt, indeed in the month Xanthicus—which we call Nisan and it begins our year—on the 14th day according to the moon, the sun then standing in Aries, for in this month we were freed from Egyptian bondage, and so we do keep it in companies, nothing of the victim being left until the next day.

⁷ Philo, Vol. VII, *Special Laws* II.xxvii.148, 149. Tr. by Colson. Loeb Classical Library.

⁸ *Ant.* III.x.5. Loeb Classical Library.

The principal verbs in this sentence are two—*ἐνόμισεν* καὶ *τελοῦμεν*. There is no specific word here for paschal supper, but the one word *θυσία* is called *πάσχα*, and in this long sentence apparently represents the whole ceremony, and that taking place on the 14th of Nisan. For in the concluding clause, emphasis is made that no piece of the victim was kept until the next day. Thus it must have been eaten on the 14th. Josephus must therefore have had in mind not only the sacrifice, but also the eating of the same in the equation *θυσία* = *πάσχα*. Furthermore, in his subsequent sentence he goes on to describe the service of the 15th day, which he says succeeds the *πάσχα*. How therefore could the supper have been part of the 15th? It surely would appear out of turn here to date the sacrifice and supper other than the 14th of Nisan.

The genitive absolute *ἐν κριῷ τοῦ ἥλιου καθεστώτος* is not merely an aside in this interesting sentence, but shows that Josephus understood the relation of early astronomy and of the ancient agricultural seasons to his own time. For, although at the time of the exodus the vernal equinox, with reference to the stars, was nearly two weeks later than in the first century,⁹ and the paschal season therefore probably as late, yet

⁹ Edward Freiherr von Haerdtl, "Astro-nomische Beiträge assyrischen Chronologie," *Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Classe*. 49. Band. Wien, 1885, 154.



Full moon always at its highest point at midnight

in both paschal periods, the sun was in Aries during a common-year passover, but in Taurus during a leap-year passover. There was a contrasting difference, however, between the period of the exodus and that of the first century. In the time of Moses, the word Aries could refer only to the constellation, for the signs of the zodiac were not described until the Nabonassar era. But in the first century, the paschal season of a common year could occur only in the actual *sign* Aries, for already, due to precession, the vernal equinox had retrograded into the adjacent constellation Pisces.¹⁰

The fact that Josephus does not mention the sign, would indicate that he refers to the constellation, and hence to the time of Moses, whose passover he is describing. In addition too, Josephus is obviously depicting the passover of a common year, and his language appears to imply that such was the character of the year when Israel left Egypt. For under the seventh Egyptian plague, the barley was in ear and the flax bolled (Ex. 9:31). This must have been at least three months before the passover, and very early indeed for barley ears, even though the season in Egypt was earlier than that of Palestine.

A third 14th-day passover by Josephus relates to the time of Darius I, when the

second temple had been completed. The text reads:

καὶ τὴν ἑορτὴν ἡγαγον ἀγνεύοντες μετὰ γυναικῶν καὶ τέκνων τῷ πατρίῳ νόμῳ, καὶ τὴν πάσχα προσαγορευομένην θυσίαν τῇ τετάρτῃ καὶ δεκάτῃ τοῦ αὐτοῦ μηνὸς ἐπιτελέσαντες, κατευωχήθησαν ἐπὶ ἡμέρας ἐπτά, μηδεμιᾶς φειδόμενοι πολυτελείας, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς ὀλοκαυτώσεις ἐπιφέροντες τῷ θεῷ καὶ χαριστηρίους θυσίας ἱερουργοῦντες. . . .¹¹

Translation (mine)—

And they kept the feast in a state of purity with women and children, according to the law of their fathers, and having fulfilled the sacrifice named *πάσχα* on the 14th day of the same month, they feasted for seven days, sparing no expense, but bringing whole burnt offerings to God, and offering sacrifices of thanksgiving. . . .

In this text Josephus makes a difference between the seven-day feast of unleavened bread as a whole, with its distinctive offerings, and the sacrifice named *πάσχα*, which he says was completed on the 14th day. We should not therefore expect the *πάσχα* ceremony to extend over into the 15th day. The offerings called *όλοκαυτώσεις* and *χαριστήριοι θυσίαι* will be referred to later—the sacrifices pertaining to the seven-day feast.

Why then should we conclude that either Philo or Josephus would present a changed emphasis regarding the 14th-day passover hereto described? Apparently they do not do this, but their festal terms are not always understood.

¹⁰ C. W. C. Barlow and G. H. Bryan, *Elementary Mathematical Astronomy*. London, 1934, 106.

¹¹ *Ant. XI.iv.8.*



Full moon rises at sunset

III. We wish to compare two more texts—one each from Josephus and Philo, and both of similar trend. With reference to these two passages, the claim has been made that the writers thereby place the paschal sacrifice on the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan, and the supper on the subsequent evening of the 15th. The text by Josephus reads:

οἱ δ', ἐνστάσης ἑορτῆς, πάσχα καλεῖται, καθ' ἣν θύοντιν μὲν ἀπὸ ἐνάτης ὥρας μέχρις ἐνδεκάτης, ὥσπερ δὲ φατρία περὶ ἐκάστην γίνεται θυσίαν οὐκ ἐλάσσων ἀνδρῶν δέκα, μόνον γὰρ οὐκ ἔξεστιν δαίνυσθαι πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ συνείκοσιν ἀθροίζονται, τῶν μὲν θυμάτων εἰκοσιπέντε μυριάδας ἡριθμησαν, etc.¹²

Translation (mine)—

So, when the festival had come—it is called *πάσχα*—during which, on the one hand [*μὲν*] they sacrifice from the ninth hour to the eleventh, but on the other hand [*δὲ*] as it were a little company of not less than ten gathers around the offering, for it is not permissible to dine alone, and often as many as twenty are numbered, these high priests counted as many as 250,000 of sacrifices, etc.

In this scene there are two contrasting sacrificial occasions: (1) The afternoon sacrifices, as indicated by the *μὲν* clause, and involving the whole feast, so often called *πάσχα* by Josephus, as in this text; and (2) the paschal sacrifice and supper, represented by the *δὲ* clause, around whose tables the small groups of ten or twenty assembled. The afternoon offerings embraced the *ὁλοκαυτώσεις*, *χαριστήριοι θυσίαι* and *σωτήρια*—burnt offerings, thank offerings, and the peace

¹² *Wars VI.ix.3.*

offerings.¹³ These sacrifices began in the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan,¹⁴ and continued throughout the festival. The peace offerings on the 14th day were also called passovers.¹⁵ Not all the people necessarily took part in the afternoon sacrifices, at which time, obviously, no accurate count could have been made. The paschal companies, on the other hand, included the whole nation, and hence it was only at the time of this ceremony that a strict count could have been carried out. In this text Josephus does not state at what time of day the small group sacrifice customarily occurred; but in *Wars II.i.2* and *II.ii.5* he had already featured it as an evening episode,¹⁶ and later, in *Antiquities*, he several times describes both sacrifice and supper as belonging to one and the same day—the 14th of Nisan. These texts have been discussed. Hence the paschal ceremony was obviously an evening event during the life of Josephus.

The foregoing incident took place in the time of Nero, whom Cestius Gallus wished to inform of the number of Jews in Jerusalem when the Jewish revolt was just beginning—probably about 65 A.D.¹⁷

¹³ *Ant. XI.iv.8* and *Wars IV.vii.2.*

¹⁴ Maimonides, *De Sacrificiis Liber*, cap. dec., sec. 12. Tr. by Compiegne de Veil. Londini, 1683.

¹⁵ Deut. 16:2; 2 Chron. 30:16,17.

¹⁶ It was the evening drunkenness of Archelaus that started the Jewish sedition which accompanied the paschal ceremony.

¹⁷ *Wars II.xiv.3.* Loeb Classical Library (margin).

shiped²¹—not sun and moon—but the Lamb of God, of whom the bleeding sacrifice was at that very moment a figure. It seems most improbable that this solemn and impressive ceremony was ever changed by the Jews until forced by Roman persecution to do so.

In near eastern countries the Nisan moon regularly fulls on the 13th of the lunar month.²² But not so in the seventh month, whose feast of Tabernacles in this text Philo is comparing with the paschal 14th. He states that the autumn feast came on the 15th for the same reason that the spring feast occurred on the 14th, namely, because the world was then full of light. The sun shone all day, and the moon shone all night.²³

In the autumn, however, the astronomical conditions are quite different from those in the spring on account of the Harvest Moon, which, toward the middle of the Jewish seventh month, rises full about sunset for several evenings in succession.²⁴ But in the spring month Nisan, the moon rises full at sunset only once, and that at the beginning of the paschal 14th. Thereafter the moon appears about an hour later each consecutive night. Hence the feast of Tabernacles began in fullness of light even though the moon may have fulled several days earlier than the 15th.

Our context shows that Philo definitely understood the astronomy of the Jewish feasts. It therefore seems very

²¹ Ex. 12:27.

²² *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. LXIII, Part II, 1944, 183, 183.

²³ Philo, *Id.*, XXVIII.155. Loeb Classical Library.

²⁴ In the season of Tabernacles, both setting sun and rising moon course so low against the horizon that for several evenings together the full moon rises with very little difference of time.

inconsistent to charge him with confused and contradictory statements as we shall have to do if we are to conclude that his afternoon sacrifices included the paschal lambs. He is in agreement with the OT when he assumes that on the paschal 14th throughout the whole day the nation was honored with the dignity of the priest's office. In 2 Chron. 30: 16,17 this honor appears to be respected. Here, on account of levitical uncleanness, some of the people did not offer their passover peace offerings in the temple—a statement suggesting that there were some who did, as in 2 Chron. 35:11.

No confusion in any way arises in our Philonic text by the interpretation that the “myriads of victims” comprised the burnt offerings, thank offerings, and peace offerings, as we have explained for *Wars VI. ix.3*. With this understanding, the paschal ceremony had already been celebrated at the sunset beginning of the paschal 14th. And though all the rest of the day was still the 14th, yet it was not the time of the paschal sacrifice. This simple exposition implies that in the time of Philo and Josephus the ancient ceremonies were still in operation. If such were not the case, then why should Josephus say, several times over, that in his own day the people kept the paschal rite the same as in the time of the exodus.²⁵

The difficulty which has arisen over these texts largely comes from the assumption that the word πάσχα always refers to the paschal ceremony. On the contrary, as has been pointed out, this word commonly refers to the whole feast of unleavened bread. And no different meaning should be ascribed to it unless represented in the text.

²⁵ *Ant. II.xiv.6; III.x.5; Against Apion I.8.*

NOTE. The drawings illustrating this article were made by Harry L. Gage from illustrations in *The Raft Book*, by permission of the publishers, George Grady Press, New York, and of the author, Harold Gatty.



Full moon sets at sunrise

The companion text from Philo is equally significant:

Μετὰ δὲ τὴν νουμηνίαν ἐστὶν ἑορτὴ τετάρτη, τὰ διαβατήρια, ἣν Ἐβραιοὶ Πάσχα πατρίῳ γλώττῃ καλοῦσιν, ἐν ᾧ θύουσι πανδημεῖ πολλὰς μυριάδας ἱερειῶν ἀρξάμενοι ἀπὸ μεσημβρίας ἥρχι ἐσπέρας, ὁ λεὼς ἄπας, πρεσβύται καὶ νέοι, κατ' ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν ἱερωσύνης ἀξώματι τετιμημένοι.¹⁸

Translation (mine)—

After the new moon festival is the fourth feast—the Crossing-feast—which the Hebrews call *Πάσχα* in their native tongue, in which all the people, old and young together, honored on that day with the dignity of the priesthood, sacrifice many myriads of victims from noon until evening.

This text introduces the feast called the Crossing-feast by Philo, but *πάσχα* in native Hebrew. The writer is speaking of a specific day of the festival—*κατ' ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν*—a day on which old and young alike were honored with the office of priest. The day in point must have been 14 Nisan, when the paschal lambs were offered, but throughout the whole day, the people, if levitically clean, also performed priestly services in the temple in connection with their peace offerings. The claim has been made that the “myriads of victims from noon until evening” included the paschal sacrifices. But this claim is inconsistent with chapter xxvii, in which this text is found; for at the end Philo

declares with emphasis that both pass-over sacrifice and banquet were celebrated on the 14th day. He could not therefore have numbered the *πάσχα* with the afternoon victims, for with this understanding, the banquet would necessarily have been served on the evening *in eunte* of the 15th!

Moreover, in *De Vita Mosis* Philo again states that the 14th day was clearly appointed for the paschal rite.¹⁹ And he further marks the paschal day astronomically when he says—*ἡλιον καὶ σελήνης κατ' ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν ἀλλήλοις ἐπανατελλόντων τῶν αὐλαῖς ἀδιαστάτοις* (when sun and moon on that day appear upon [*ἐπ'*] and up [*ἀνά*]to each other in undivided rays of light).²⁰

Now the “upon and up” appearance of the paschal sun and moon always occurs after the moon has fulled, and therefore at the very beginning of the 14th of Nisan, when at sunset the sun is lowering *upon* the western horizon, while in the east the moon, now full, is rising *up* simultaneously. The Babylonians said that the god was being seen with the god. But with the Hebrews, the presence of the paschal full moon in the eastern sky together with the westerling sun, was an astronomical event that pointed to the slain lamb. And the people bowed their heads and wor-

¹⁸ Philo, Vol. VII, *Special Laws* II.xxvii.145. Loeb Classical Library.

¹⁹ Philo, *Special Laws* II.xxxiii.210. Tr. by Colson. Loeb Classical Library.

